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ABSTRACT

This report describes the first year evaluation of the implementation and effects of the Project SELF HELP, a family literacy program located in two urban elementary schools and run by a community organization. The program was available to 15 adults from each site who had lower than a fifth grade reading level and whose children were experiencing academic difficulty in school. Parents were given counseling and instruction in parenting skills, life skills, and other basic skills. Each parent regularly participated in school activities. Older children participated in an after-school tutorial program, while younger children received day care services. Opportunities for joint adult-child interactions were regularly provided. Preliminary findings indicated that elementary students benefitted from summer reading activities. According to results from two measures, parents' literacy improved. Parents also had high scores on the home environment index. Teachers rated students as significantly improved in social behavior, attention, and control of disruptive behaviors. These findings should be interpreted cautiously because of the limited sample size and the fact that this was the first year of the program. Implications for future studies are discussed, and four references are appended. (GLR)

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CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

PROJECT SELF HELP

A First-Year Evaluation of a Family Literacy Program

Lawrence J. Dolan

Report No. 8 / April 1992

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CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The nation's schools must do more to improve the education of all children, but schools cannot do this alone. More will be accomplished if families and communities work with children, with each other, and with schools to promote successful students.

The mission of this Center is to conduct research, evaluations, policy analyses, and dissemination to produce new and useful knowledge about how families, schools, and communities influence student motivation, learning, and development. A second important goal is to improve the connections between and among these major social institutions.

Two research programs guide the Center's work: the Program on the Early Years of Childhood, covering children aged 0-10 through the elementary grades; and the Program on the Years of Early and Late Adolescence, covering youngsters aged 11-19 through the middle and high school grades.

Research on family, school, and community connections must be conducted to understand more about all children and all families, not just those who are economically and educationally advantaged or already connected to school and community resources. The Center's projects pay particular attention to the diversity of family cultures and backgrounds and to the diversity in family, school, and community practices that support families in helping children succeed across the years of childhood and adolescence. Projects also examine policies at the federal, state, and local levels that produce effective partnerships.

A third program of Institutional Activities includes a wide range of dissemination projects to extend the Center's national leadership. The Center's work will yield new information, practices, and policies to promote partnerships among families, communities, and schools to benefit children's learning.

Abstract

A large number of family and intergenerational programs to promote family literacy are in operation across the United States, but little systematic evaluation has been conducted. This report describes the first-year evaluation of the implementation and effects of the SELF HELP program, which is located within two urban elementary schools and run by a community organization. The program was available to fifteen adults from each site who had a reading level lower than the fifth grade and who had children in the schools who were experiencing academic difficulty. The program provided targeted activities for the parents and their children. In general, the evaluation finds that elementary students seemed to benefit from summer reading activities, parents' literacy improved on two measures, teachers rated students as significantly improved in social behavior, attention, and social behavior; parents scored high on an educational environment of the home index compared to a contrast sample. These and other findings need to be interpreted cautiously because of the limited sample size of the study and the fact that this was the first year for the program and its participants.

Introduction

Research is clear that parental involvement with the school and a supportive educational environment in the home benefits student academic achievement. In our inner cities, in which many schools have a dropout rate approaching 50 percent, strategies within the community, the family, and the classroom that increase children's educational success should be considered a priority.

However, involvement with the school and providing a supportive home environment can work at cross purposes with the needs of poor parents, who also must pursue literacy or job skills training in order to improve the security of their families. Parents who elect to pursue their own learning and employment skills to improve the economic health of their families are unavailable to their child's school; conversely, parents who delay obtaining needed skills in order to be involved in their children's education may impair the economic health of their families.

This situation should and need not exist. These two needs could be met simultaneously if literacy skills training for adults were provided at local elementary schools. Arranging for parents to pursue their own education at their child's school could produce a synergistic effect which promotes additional learning for both the parent and the child. Parents would be involved in their own educational program, but also be involved in the elementary school's activities, which would promote learning for their children.

Approximately 500 family and intergenerational programs to promote family literacy are in operation across the United States (Nickse, 1990). Even Start, funded by the United States Department of Education, currently has over 100 programs operating, with more planned as funding becomes available. The Head Start Act has also led to family literacy programs being implemented in a large percentage of Head Start Centers. Probably the largest private source of programs is the Center for Family Literacy, funded by the Kenan Family Trust and recently by the Toyota Corporation, which has a total of more than 100 sites in 27 states. Programs vary widely in level of intensity, types of interaction between parent and children, and the primary targets (parent or child) of the intervention.

Unfortunately, little systematic evaluation has been conducted on family literacy programs. Even Start has an evaluation being completed by Abt Associates that is due to Congress in 1993. The evaluation of the Kenan Family Literacy Model by the National Center for Family Literacy (Darling & Hayes, 1989) points to the difficulties of defining criteria for effectiveness, coping with the in-and-out flow of participants, and interpreting outcomes in light of types of parents involved. Most evaluations have taken a case study approach because of the limited numbers of adults involved, their varying participation in levels of programs, and fears that response burden might lead to program withdrawal.

The goal of this project was to evaluate the implementation and effects of the SELF HELP family literacy program, which is located within two Baltimore City elementary schools, and run by the Southeast Community Organization (SECO). During the period of evaluation (March 1990 -August 1991) SELF HELP was funded exclusively by a one-time Community Problem Solving grant from the United Way of Central Maryland.

The two sites served by the program are considered among the most needy elementary schools in Baltimore. Many of the parents whose children attend these schools are on welfare and have limited educational skills. Additionally, both sites qualify for schoolwide Chapter 1 funding.

The program was available to fifteen adults from each site who had a reading level lower than the fifth grade and who had children in the school experiencing academic difficulty (i.e., falling behind, failing a grade). The program runs three hours per day for two days per week. The program provides instruction to parents in basic skills (reading, spelling, and math) and counseling. In addition, each adult participates in school activities on a regular basis, their children participate in an after-school tutorial program, and younger children are provided day care services while the adults are involved in the classroom. Not all adults in the program had preschool children. Opportunities for joint adult-child interactions are structured into the program on a regular basis. An expanded program continues throughout the summer months.

The goals of the program were as follows:

1. To develop "literate families" by raising literacy skills for all age groups of participants, thereby increasing the life options of participants.

2. To increase parent involvement in elementary schools and develop the parents' advocacy skills, thereby increasing the academic achievement of their children.

3. To create and refine a model intergenerational literacy program which can be replicated in Baltimore City and beyond.

4. To intervene in the "summer reading loss" phenomenon experienced by economically disadvantaged children.

The content of instruction for the adults consists of the following:

1. Basic literacy skills---reading, phonics, writing, spelling, and mathematics.

2. Parenting skills---communication, discipline, child advocacy.

3. Life skills---practical applications of literacy skills for daily living.

4. Counseling---group discussion of parenting problems, family crises, social service needs and services.

The instructional content for the elementary students consists of the following:

1. Assistance with weekly homework from teachers.

2. Tutorial assistance twice per week in weak areas (phonics, math, word attack skills, writing).

The instructional content for the preschoolers consists of the following:

1. Pre-reading readiness skills via creative play, art, music, and structured activities. These include oral language development, creative expression, letter and number identification, and rhyming games.

2. Skills, habits, attitudes and behaviors which will be expected of students in kindergarten and first grade.

Each three-hour period contains time for instruction within the three age group components and a period of time for joint adult and child interaction.

The summer reading program component of SELF HELP is an eight-week period during which the program operates three days per week. Content each week is focused on a particular trip to a place of interest, and the various modes of transportation used to travel there. All three age groups participate in weekly visits to the library to choose books and read about the trip, and in follow-up activities such as art projects and the creation of stories which reflect upon their experience. Parents receive modeling of appropriate conduct and the blending of educational/recreational activities.

The initial stage of evaluation of SELF HELP focuses on obtaining good descriptive data on the program's actual operations at varying stages of program development. Questions regarding the representativeness of the parents from the school catchment area, barriers to access, and the actual levels of use of the program were addressed. Parent response to the program, both as a consumer and as a learner, was also of concern in the evaluation. Were there gains in literacy? What predicted completion of the program, What predicted parent gains in literacy? Did the program lead to an improved educational environment of the home? Attention was also placed on the consequences for the elementary aged children of the parents involved in the program. To what extent did the program have an impact on student achievement, attendance, and school-related affective concerns?

Methodology

The evaluation focused on a total of twenty-four families from the two sites. Because the two sites (1) were managed by the same organization (SECO), (2) used the same staff, and (3) served similarly economically deprived communities in Southeast Baltimore, the analyses were done on the combined samples.

The SELF HELP program started in the Spring of 1990 and continued through June 1991. The evaluation was initiated a few months after the program start-up. Baseline performance assessments and in-take interviews were completed by project staff. Access to school records was granted, making school achievement, attendance, and teachers' ratings of student behaviors available. Parents were given an assessment of the home educational environment (Dolan,1983) which included indices of educational motivation for both themselves and their children, the level of interaction around educational activities, and the level of academic guidance and stimulation in the home. Parents were also interviewed by project staff about their perceptions of the program's strengths and weaknesses.

Parent literacy was assessed by the Wide Range Achievement Test and by the Maryland Adult Performance Program Competency Assessment System. Teachers were asked to complete a rating of classroom adaptation (Werthamer-Larsson, 1991) for the target children in the fall of 1990 and in the spring of 1991.

The evaluation had some limitations. Among the most serious were limited numbers of parents, children from multiple grade levels, varied points of entry into the program, and varied points of exit from the program for multiple reasons. A contrast sample of children, matched for grade and baseline achievement, was identified, but a contrast sample of parents at comparable levels of literacy was not possible. A random group of twenty-five parents did participate, but their literacy levels were not obtained other than through questions regarding educational background.

In addition, the selection process for parents made it unclear how representative these parents were in contrast to other parents in the community whose children attended the two schools. The parents met initial literacy standards, but probably had greater motivation and free time to engage in the program than many of the other parents in the community.

Results

Basic descriptive statistics for students and parents, partitioned into program and contrast samples, are displayed in Table 1. Correlations between selected parent and student variables with number of hours of instruction, parent dropout, and home educational environment are displayed in Table 2.

Tables 1 & 2 About Here

The following results should be interpreted with caution in light of the limited sample sizes and the fact that this was the first year for the program and the first year for the adults in the program.

* Elementary students seemed to benefit from the summer reading activities. Students in the summer program who were matched with other students on the basis of reading for the previous spring had significantly higher first quarter reading grades. These gains remained at the end of the year. No gains were noted in language grades, math grades, or in student rates of attendance. There were no differences in this pattern by grade level.

  The summer reading program appeared to have a significant impact on students' reading. Students in the program, which reinforces reading through the reading of stories to support field trip experiences, maintained previous gains in reading over the summer months.

* Teachers' ratings of targeted students significantly improved from the 1st to the 4th quarter, whereas ratings of a matched sample of students remained the same. These ratings included social behavior, attention, and disruptive behaviors.

* Parents' literacy improved on the WRAT (Wide Range Achievement Test, which measures basic skills in reading, mathematics, and spelling) and the MAPP (State of Maryland assessment of life skills) for those who remained in the program. Again, limited sample sizes require that these results be interpreted with caution and closely monitored in the future. In all areas, the parents entered at an average

of low-fourth-grade equivalency, and those parents who remained in the program exited with mid-sixth-grade skill equivalency. Parents who left the program did not take a spring achievement measure. These parents received lower fall scores than the parents who remained in the program (mid-third-grade equivalency).

* Parents' reports on the educational environment of the home were high compared to the contrast sample. Table 2 reports that the home environment index predicted elementary student grades in language, teacher rating of classroom adaptation, average teacher rating of work/study habits, number of absences, number of tardy days, and membership in the PTO.

  The home environment index also predicted whether parents would drop out of the program. This result is very significant in that one of the major paths to improved child literacy is through the improved learning environment of the home.

* The children of those parents who stayed in the program longer had better grades and teacher ratings of behavior. The number of hours spent in the program was also associated with being on public assistance and being a membership in the PTO.

* The children of parents who dropped out had lower grades and lower teacher ratings of classroom adaptation. The parents who dropped out had lower baseline WRAT scores and poorer home educational environments.

* No data were collected on pre-schoolers.

* Parents interviewed in June reported high levels of satisfaction with the program. Parents who dropped out of the program also were satisfied with the program. External factors -- health, moving out of the community -- were involved in the decision to drop out. However, dropouts tended to have lower levels of motivation for education and poorer home educational environments.

Conclusions and Future Work

It must be reiterated that these findings are to be interpreted with caution given the limited sample size. Early indications are that parents who remain in the program seem to improve in their literacy skills, but more complete assessments at regular intervals are needed. This would permit a better understanding of the development of literacy skills and make available an indicator of literacy development for the dropout sample.

The finding that children are more positively rated by teachers over the course of the year must be tempered by the fact that teachers knew which children were involved with the academic support activities.

Although all parents were quite high on the home educational environment index (administrated after program start-up), it appears that self-reports of educational concern and support do relate to student performance and parent attainment of literacy skills. This would support program components that focus on home support for the children in school as well as direct literacy instruction. This connection reaffirms research that links the practices of families that support education with student success in school. For family literacy programs, this connection suggests that the programs need to include more specific information for all families about how to support their children as students at home so that more home environments assure the features and practices that encourage students' positive achievements, attitudes, and behaviors.

Of the 24 families studied, nine dropped out of the program. We need to better understand these families and their reasons for leaving. They represent less motivated and less supportive families -- families with the greatest needs. One possible model that should be explored is whether parent persistence in completing the program is the link to student persistence in the classroom. By not giving up, these parents are presenting a role model to their children concerning the importance of completing academic work.

Future evaluations should more thoroughly assess parent literacy gains, define a better matched contrast sample of parents who do not experience the program, monitor dropout more carefully, measure the impact on preschool children, and have

better descriptions of the actual program that each family receives. Larger sample sizes will also be necessary to test more formal effects models.

These preliminary results are encouraging. Family literacy programs need to be studied over several years, particularly if more than modest results are to be achieved. The SECO SELF HELP program focuses on a long-term process of change that needs to continue its investment in the lives of the families involved to keep them engaged with the program over several years.

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Table 1

PROJECT SELF HELP
Descriptive Statistics for Students & Parents by Design Category

	Program		Contrast	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Student Variables				
Reading Grade Fall	2.97	.95	3.29	.57
Reading Grade Spring	2.87	.87	3.11	.63
Lang. Arts Grade F	3.09	.53	3.18	.60
Lang. Arts Grade S	3.00	.63	3.23	.83
Math. Grade F	3.05	.80	3.00	.82
Math. Grade S	2.82	.94	2.69	1.03
Teacher Rating-Work Habits F	1.46	.50	1.35	.48
Teacher Rating-Work Habits S	1.70	.47	1.48	.56
Teacher Rating Class. Adapt.F	3.75	1.40	3.86	1.47
Teacher Rating Class. Adapt.S	4.05	.75	3.75	.86
Days Absent F	2.28	2.85	2.00	2.27
Days Absent S	4.20	5.24	5.38	5.53
Days Tardy F	1.07	1.82	1.28	2.56
Days Tardy S	1.28	3.34	1.82	3.37

Table 1 (continued)

	Program		Contrast	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Parent Variables:				
WRAT Reading F (N=22)	45.09	20.61		
WRAT Reading F (N=12)	51.94	19.56		
WRAT Reading S (N=12)	65.50	24.37		
WRAT Spelling F (N=22)	36.86	15.86		
WRAT Spelling F (N=12)	39.66	12.87		
WRAT Spelling S (N=12)	50.16	14.86		
WRAT Math F (N=22)	35.90	17.90		
WRAT Math F (N=12)	42.45	15.88		
WRAT Math S (N=12)	54.33	13.54		
MAPP F (N=22)	153.22	107.39		
MAPP F (N=12)	170.98	75.98		
MAPP S (N=12)	222.00	14.10		
Home Environment (N=22)	131.44	11.80	109.40	14.2
Home Environment (N=12)	139.56	12.78		

Grades Scale (1=Excellent...4=Poor) Work Habits (1=Poor..2=Satisfactory)
Class Adaptation (1=Low..4=High)

Parent sample of 12 who did not dropout.

Table 2

PROJECT SELP HELP
Correlations Between Student & Parent Variables and Hours in the Program, Parent Dropout, and the Home Educational Environment

	Hours In Program	Parent Dropout (1=Yes,2=No)	Home Educ. Environment
Student Variables			
Average Reading Grades(L-H)	.06	.11	.25
Average Language Arts Grade	.23	.28	.40*
Average Math. Grade	-.18	.29	.23
Average Rating Work Habits	.24	.19	.51**
Average Rating Class. Adapt.	.30*	.38*	.36*
Days Absent	.02	.09	-.43*
Days Tardy	.15	-.23	-.38*
Parent Variables			
Parent Education	.17	-.09	.23
Public Assistance (Y=1,N=2)	-.40*	-.12	.18
Member PTO (Y=1,N=2)	-.40*	-.05	-.57**
WRAT Reading (Baseline)	-.03	.29	.33*
WRAT Spelling (Baseline)	-.06	.32*	.56**
WRAT Math. (Baseline)	-.01	.26	.37*
Home Educational Environment	.06	.36*	---

* p<.05
**p<.01

N= 24 Parents
N= 38 Students